Learning Independence

When is a parent supposed to start teaching a child the big lessons in life, like how to be independent, how to rebound from failure, how to persist and strive towards a goal?

Some parents decide to start treating a teenager like a “friend”, and hold discussion sessions, where they formally tackle such topics. Although these are well-meant efforts, it’s too little too late.

These lessons should start from the minute a baby is born.

Babies are very intelligent, and learn very fast. If you think about the amount of information a baby has to learn between age zero and one year, it’s mind-boggling! It is really very demeaning to assume they cannot learn lifelong skills and principles.

Let’s take the case of learning to walk. A toddler holds onto the side of the coffee table, and wobbles along. Then he attempts to let go of the crutch, and takes a few steps. At which point, he stumbles and falls. The fall is from a very low height, and usually onto some rug or carpet, and onto a well-diapered bottom. Yet, it’s a new experience to fall, and though the pain is minimal, he cries: A very natural reaction to a new, scary experience.

Yet, the reaction from an on-looking mother might often be as follows. She screams in anxiety, runs over to the child, scoops him up from the floor, and in a high-pitched scared voice, shouts a string of sentences or questions, “Are you alright? Are you hurt? “ And so on. The child understands now that what just happened is a frightening occurrence since even his rock and support, the mother, is scared out of her wits. He therefore adjusts his cries, which now become louder and more hysterical, to match those of the mother.

When these training sessions repeat themselves several times a day, several days a week, for months or years on end, the child is now properly trained on how to lose self-control, go hysterical, act helpless, and rely on others to take care of his failures. He is now ready for a life of failure.

Consider this alternative mother: when the same toddler teetered and fell, and started to whine, she did not even look up from her work. Message: this is not a big deal, not important enough to even get my attention. She then says in an even voice, “Get up! Stop whining!” She does not move a finger to help until he gets up. Depending on where she is, she can now say, “Come here!” and he crawl his way back to Mommy. At this point, she scoops him up and hugs him lovingly and says, “Hey, big boy, I’m so proud of you!”

When the same attitude is carried out for various incidents throughout the days, the child learns that failures in life are a matter of course, and merely steps toward success. He learns that one has to help oneself overcome these failures. No one is going to help you. He learns that Mom (or God, or the government, or his loved ones) will always be there for him.

It’s no wonder children raised in this manner turn out to be self-confident, independent, successful adults. They learned hands-on, not through lectures. They learned early, and these attributes became part of their character.